

MARK MADISON: Today is June 29th, 2011, and I'm Mark Madison at the Student Climate and Conservation Congress, an opportunity for high school students from around the country who are interested in possible environmental careers to hear from exciting and inspiring speakers, and I have one of the speakers with me this morning, Juan Martinez, who is going to address the students this evening, and he's agreed to do a brief Podcast with us.

Juan is a proud product of South Central L.A., and he is the national Natural Leaders Network Coordinator for the Children & Nature Network. His passion is to empower individuals and youth, and that led him to direct the Sierra Club's first Environmental Justice Youth Leadership Academy in L.A. In 2009 he introduced the Department of Interior's Ken Salazar at Power Shift in Washington D.C., the largest gathering on youth climate change. And he was invited by the White House to attend the National Forum on Clean Energy Economy. Currently, he's Director of the Natural Leaders Network, which is part of the Children & Nature Network.

Juan, welcome to Shepherdstown, West Virginia. We appreciate you coming here.

JUAN MARTINEZ: Thanks. It's always amazing times here.

MARK MADISON: And tell us what you do for the Children & Nature Network.

JUAN MARTINEZ: So what I do, Rich Louv wrote a book about-- in 2005 called "Last Child In the Woods" and pretty much coined the phrase "nature deficit disorder." Now, for a long time, I think, a lot of us have been working around this issue to connect people and nature, but Rich kind of brought it all to a catalyst and really initiated a grass roots movement throughout the country and really the world. So he brought me to the table and said, "How do we get more young people involved?" And I said, "Well,

we have to create a place and a sense of security for these young people who feel passionate just about their connection with nature and their love for it," and that's where the Natural Leaders Network came about.

So what we do now is do leadership development through peer-to-peer networking throughout country. We do different initiatives and attend different conferences and spread the message of celebrating our connection to nature while also serving and doing research studies as well.

MARK MADISON: What type of connections to nature did you have as a youth, Juan?

JUAN MARTINEZ: For me, it was very dim in the beginning. I grew up in South Central. They didn't have much. Grew up poor. Grew up angry for what I felt the cards had been dealt to me. And up to the age of 15, I didn't see much hope in the future for myself. Around that time, I was given an ultimatum in detention. I was told either I stay in detention for the rest of the semester or go to Ecoclub. And for a kid who at that point was trying to be the tough guy in school and a football player, very dark kind of person at that time, it wasn't such a clear decision. Like I could have stayed in detention and I would have been fine.

But I took a chance and went to Ecoclub, and the first thing Miss Peppin, who ran the Ecoclub, tells me is "Go ahead, grab a bag of seeds, and let's go out to the garden." And in that garden I decided to grow jalapenos, which to me were delicious and good food, and I grew up with them, but more than anything, I saw my mom grow jalapenos in our backyard in coffee pots and tires and her own unique way of growing plants and herbs and different vegetables. And so I wanted to show to my mom that I could do that, too, and I wanted to make salsa for her at the end of that crop.

Then they tricked me. Then I started worrying about photosynthesis, carbon dioxide, and pH balance and all these different things, and I started caring about school, and I did better, and I got more interested in what school represented.

So at the end of that semester, I got an opportunity to go to the Teton Science School in Wyoming. Now, for a kid who grew up in the middle of South Central and didn't have-- didn't see much beyond that, to see the stars for the first time in my life, to see more stars than I could count for the first time in my life, to see a shooting star and realize it wasn't a Disney special effect or anything like that, to see a free-flowing river, and to get a good night's sleep because there wasn't a helicopter or police siren outside my window was an enlightening moment, to say the least. And then the scientific experience that came with that, you know, learning about plate tectonics and erosion and different flora and fauna just kind of opened up a new world to me in making sure that I realized that just as I was connected to those stars that I was looking at so was I connected to my community back home.

MARK MADISON: That's a great story. Teton Science School is a beautiful place.

JUAN MARTINEZ: Yeah, right.

MARK MADISON: Juan, what message do you give young people to inspire them and get them engaged like you?

JUAN MARTINEZ: I think it's follow your passion, and we're all integrated with this passion to explore and enjoy nature. It's integrated in our genes, I think. And when I look back at the last couple weeks, you know, my first-- I'm a National Geographic Explorer now. I was named an Emergent Explorer for 2011. I work with the North Face as an ambassador for their brand. I work with the Children & Nature

Network. I work with leaders in this issue... Rich Louv, Martin Oblong, Cheryl Charles... all mentors of mine. You know, 12 years ago when I was 15, I didn't see myself accomplishing any of these things. So if there's a message that I can put out there is that never doubt what you're capable of doing, just following your passion, and that's what I've been doing ever since.

MARK MADISON: That's great, Juan. That's a good quote to go out on.

If people wanted to learn more about the Children & Nature Network, do you guys have a web site?

JUAN MARTINEZ: We do, [www.childrenandnaturenetwork.org](http://www.childrenandnaturenetwork.org).

MARK MADISON: Thank you very much, Juan. We have been speaking with Juan Martinez at the Student Climate and Conservation Congress, and he's going to be addressing about 100 high school kids this evening. So thanks again, Juan.

JUAN MARTINEZ: Thank you.